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COMMUNITY POWER STRUCTURE AND EDUCATIONAL DECISION-MAKING IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY.

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THE MINORITY OF PEOPLE WHO OCCUPY THE TOP LEADERSHIP LEVEL IN COMMUNITY ACTIVITIES WERE DISCUSSED IN THIS PAPER. VARIOUS CONCEPTS OF THE COMMUNITY POWER STRUCTURE WERE REVIEWED, AND SOME RESEARCH FINDINGS WERE REPORTED ON A COMPARATIVE STUDY CONDUCTED IN THE POWER STRUCTURES OF THREE COMMUNITIES. FOUR ACTIVITY AREAS WERE STUDIED FOR EACH COMMUNITY--ECONOMIC AFFAIRS, GOVERNMENT, PUBLIC EDUCATION, AND PUBLIC RECREATION. DESCRIPTIONS OF THE POWER STRUCTURES OF EACH COMMUNITY WERE PRESENTED. (RS)

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COMMUNITY POWER STRUCTURE AND EDUCATIONAL DECISION-MAKING IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY*

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The residents of a community vary considerably in the extent and forms of their social participation. At one extreme are those who participate little or not at all in organized community activity. At the other extreme is that minority who make basic decisions in the important phases of civic affairs. Most people, of course, fall somewhere between these extremes, being involved to a greater or lesser extent as a participant in community activities.

My discussion today deals with one of the "extremes" I mentioned--the minority that dominates the decision-making process. Such people make up the top leadership level in the community; they are often referred to as the "top influentials" or "key influentials" in community life. These terms are commonplace in writings on community power structure, a body of literature that has received considerable attention since Floyd Hunter's pioneering work, Community Power Structure: A Study of Decision-Makers, was published in 1953. In the years since that time, the term "power structure" has become a household word. It is used in most discussions to refer to the top level initiators of policy and practice in the community.

Community Power Structure as Concept and Perspective

During the past dozen years considerable research has been done on community power structure. A great deal more is now known about this subject than was the case just a few years ago. We are reaching the point where the accumulation of knowledge makes

it unnecessary for us to rely exclusively on opinion or personal experiences when we discuss such important subjects as decision-making, power structure, influence, or leadership in the community.

The increasingly large body of literature on community power structure has added significantly to our knowledge and understanding in several ways. For one thing, these studies have given us a systematic approach to the subject--a way of looking at leadership and decision-making that makes it possible to order our observations in a coherent manner. Research has demonstrated that the exercise of power, influence, or leadership involves organized and patterned relationships of individuals and groups. Or, stated in another way, the power structure of a community is not a haphazard, individualistic, idiosyncratic, or even mysterious matter. The community as a whole functions as a system, and its leadership is a vital part of that system.

Studies of community power structure are also important in that they have developed methodological techniques for gathering systematic empirical data. These investigations have also called attention dramatically to one of the outstanding facts about public participation in civic affairs in our democracy--namely, that only a small minority of the population is actively and directly involved in decision-making processes. This is true no matter what area of community affairs we examine--economic, governmental, educational, or any other. I know of no study which has found more than three per cent of the adult population actively and

directly involved in the decision-making processes of the community. Robert Presthus, in his recently published book, Men at the Top, surveyed the literature on this precise point. He concluded that no more than one per cent are involved in American cities. In the two communities in the state of New York that he studied himself, he found a total of 80 individuals in both communities combined who played active roles in initiating and directing major community decisions. These 80 made up five one thousandths of one per cent of the combined populations of the two cities. This fact of minority involvement raises serious questions concerning the nature and functioning of our democratic society. For example, there is the key question, "Whose interests and values are being served by this pattern of decision-making?"

What I have said so far indicates that the literature on community power structure has given us important perspectives, insights, and facts. We should now note that there have also been some negative results. That is, this body of literature has tended at times to mislead us and give us distorted conceptions. The catchy phrase, community power structure, in itself tells us very little about how decisions are made. More seriously, the notion of power structure has often led to oversimplification in discussions of decision-making processes.

Early research by Hunter and those who adopted his perspectives and methods concluded uniformly that decision-making in the local community is dominated by a small, homogeneous, elite minority

consisting of dominant figures from the economic realm of community life. These studies used what is called the nominations (or reputational) technique in gathering data. That is, respondents were asked to nominate leaders they believed to be generally influential. The respondents nominated mainly persons who were prominent in economic and governmental affairs. Some researchers concluded that these nominees were <u>generally influential</u>--<u>i.e.</u>, that their influence was "across the board," not limited to specific areas of community affairs. This conclusion, as I shall show presently, is in error.

Similarly, other distortions developed in writings that appeared in opposition to the findings and perspectives of researchers employing the nominations technique. Some researchers, mainly political scientists led by Professor Robert Dahl of Yale University, developed what they term a pluralistic perspective on community power structure. These scholars contend that the nominations approach discovers reputations for power and prestige rather than actual power. Their research focuses on the study of on-going problems and issues. In studying cases of this sort, they have concluded that decision-making powers are more widely disseminated in the community than is suggested by studies based on the nominations technique. They contend that in the highly complex modern community a variety of individuals and interest groups compete for decision-making prerogatives. Power, in their view, is quite

specialized in terms of areas of activity.

The pluralists are, I believe, correct in calling attention to the specialization of influence by issue areas. Some of them have, however, exaggerated both the amount of specialization and the extent to which decision-making is widespread in the population. The facts lie between the extreme positions of nominations approach adherents and the pluralists.

Some Research Findings

Let me now report on some recent research findings. My data are drawn from a study which Keith Goldhammer and I have been conducting for the past two and one-half years under contract with the U.S. Office of Education. This research is comparative, involving three Oregon communities from which we have gathered the same kinds of data using identical procedures. The communities, which I shall call Communities A, B, and C, vary in size and other characteristics, the population ranging from some 4,000 in Community A to 12,000 in Community B and 25,000 in Community C. In each community we are studying four areas of activity--the economy, government, public education, and public recreation. We gathered nominations data on influential persons in each of these four activity areas, as well as on reputed generally influential leaders. We also obtained extensive data on the participation of educators (both teachers and administrators) in community affairs. In addition, we have 18 detailed case histories (six for each community) of decision-making over the past few years bearing on these topies:

(1) industrial diversification; (2) downtown development and revitalization; (3) planning programs; (4) facilities and programs in public recreation; (5) the school curriculum; and (6) the expansion and development of educational facilities.

I have selected some of our basic findings to report to you. First, I shall describe the power structures of the communities. Then the power structures in the different activity areas will be compared. In conclusion, I shall state some generalizations about educational power structures and decision-making.

For all three communities, nominations data for each of the four activity areas show fairly separate and distinct lists of leaders--that is, the great majority of persons are nominated in but one activity area. In none of the three communities is any person nominated in all four activity areas. In Community A, seven influentials are nominated in three areas, twelve in two, thirty-nine in one. In Community B, the respective figures are three, six, and thirty-seven; in Community C, five, five, and forty-six. In the main, therefore, each pyramid of influence is distinctive.

In all three communities, the greatest amount of overlapping influence is between economic affairs and government. This overlapping occurs because of the over-representation of the economic leaders in governmental affairs. Nearly all persons listed as influential in education and recreation who are also influential

in economic or governmental affairs play their major roles in the latter areas of activity. Stated otherwise, very few who play major roles in educational or recreational affairs are also influential in the economy or in government. Except in Community A, a small city where formal organizations in recreation are few and are linked to school programs, there is virtually no overlapping between education and recreation. Overlapping occurs most frequently among persons highest in the influence rankings, usually when a top ranking leader in the economic or governmental realms gets some nominations in education or recreation.

When questioned about the existence of general influence in their communities, the vast majority of respondents indicated their belief that there are persons who are influential regardless of the nature of the issue or activity area. In the nominations for general influentials, the rankings are dominated by the top people in economic and governmental affairs. Indeed, it can be said that the general influence rankings are virtually monopolized by top leaders from these areas. Of the fifteen general influentials in Community A, ten are influential in economic affairs, eight in government, and eight in both. Of seven general influentials in Community B, six are influential in economic affairs, six in government, and six in both. Of the nineteen in Community C, ten are influential in economic affairs, seven in government, and five in both. At the other extreme, in all three communities influen-

tials in education and recreation are nominated as general influentials almost solely when they are also influential in the economic or governmental realms.

To provide another perspective on this matter, we computed the percentages of the general influentials who were also influential in each activity area. In Community A, 67 per cent of the general influentials were also influential in economic affairs, 73 per cent in government, 40 per cent in education, and 40 per cent in recreation. In Community B, 86 per cent of the general influentials were also influential in the economy, 86 per cent in government, 14 per cent in education, and 29 per cent in recreation. In Community C, 53 per cent were influential in the economy, 37 per cent in government, 42 per cent in education and 26 per cent in recreation.

These figures do not, however, tell the whole story. It is when we look at the highest ranked general influentials that we see the primacy of the economic and governmental realms. To show this, we tabulated how many of the top five general influentials were among the top five influentials in each of the four activity areas. We found that in Community A three of the top five general influentials were among the top five in the economic realm, four in government, none in education, and none in recreation. In Community B, one in the economic realm, two in government, none in education, and one in recreation. In Community C, two in the economy,

all five in government, none in education, and two in recreation. It would seem that the top ranking general influentials are not hyperactive in educational affairs, to put it very mildly.

The findings of our 18 case histories generally lend support to the nominations data. Our analysis of cases, in fact, point to an even greater specialization by issue areas, and even within issue areas, than the nominations data indicate. Of special relevance to our interest in education is the fact that general influentials are not even as active in educational affairs as the nominations data would lead us to believe. Apparently their prestige in the community carries over so that they are nominated as being influential in education and recreation when they are not actually involved in these activity areas.

Who, then, are the influentials in education? What is the nature of the power structure in education? Let me begin answering these questions with a general statement about the relative primacy of different kinds of community activities. If you examine all the activities that take place in a community you will find that they are ranked in a hierarchy according to various criteria. In other words, activities are ranked, just as individuals are. Some activities, especially economic and governmental ones, rank very high in evaluation, while others such as education and recreation rank relatively low. This, I believe, is the basic factor involved in the under-representation of high ranking general influentials in educational affairs.

Both our nominations data and our case histories show that in all three communities the top ranking influentials in education are persons who are involved in educational affairs by virtue of the official positions they presently occupy or have occupied in the past. The most influential individuals are administrative officers--especially the superintendent, but also his assistant superintendents and an occasional principal--and former members of the school board. With few exceptions, school board members are neither very influential nor very active in other community affairs.

The top ranking general influentials, who rarely rank high in educational affairs, remain aloof in educational issues. Our case histories show that they rarely take a public stand on educational questions, still less provide the kind of leadership they do when issues arise in the economic or governmental areas. Their involvement in education is marginal and often transitory. They may on a private (not publicly known) basis, get involved in decisions concerning the location and size of school facilities. This interest is primarily economic, being motivated by considerations revolving around property values and business opportunities. Other than this, some top general influentials become involved in philanthropic activities pertaining to education, and a very small number donate funds, usually in secret, to support or oppose budget and bond elections or to support one side or another in an educational controversy.

As in other areas of decision-making, one must distinguish between those decision-making processes in education that are routine, long-run, and not steeped in controversy, and those that occur in the short-run context of public attention and participation. In the day-to-day business of running the schools, developing a curriculum, administering personnel policies, and so on, the number of decision-makers is small, involving mainly those who occupy official positions. At times of elections or public controversy, the number of active participants may increase sharply. At such times, influential leaders can emerge who have not previously been involved in educational affairs, or, indeed, in <u>any</u> kind of community affairs. A striking thing about educational controversies is that they provide occasions for individuals low in status and power to play key roles. The anti-administration forces in school conflicts include many such people. When the controversy subsides, their participation wanes, as does their influence.

In the long run, the power structure of education revolves around the administration and the school board. These people make up the vast majority of those who are concerned with educational matters on a sustained basis. Potentially the most influential are the administrators--especially the superintendent and his top aides. They are the ones who initiate action, who make proposals for change, who recommend that this or that be done. The school board and the community at large may accede wholly or

in part to these proposals, or they may turn any of them down. But in the main the school board and the public pass upon the alternatives proposed by the administration. They rarely initiate proposals themselves. On a long-run basis, those who initiate the proposals will be the top figures in the educational power structure.